

The Dark Wizard Of Donkerk

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Author's Note: This work is essentially stuck in 'first draft' state until I can find the time and incentive to put other things aside and devote myself to fixing the numerous typos, restructuring the plot a bit, punching up the prose, and some general tidying up to make it the novel that it's meant to be. It's presented here for your enjoyment, if you're the sort of person who likes to read mostly-finished things, but I'm very aware that it's not in its ideal final state. Consider yourself warned. Special thanks to ketura for making fixes to the Scrivener-compiled HTML.

The Orphan

Omarr and HIRRUSH stood over the onyx altar that had cost them a dauphin's ransom. Lit candles burnt steadily in a carefully arranged pattern that zigzagged through the room, lending the air a faint smell of smoke. These arrangements were largely forgotten as the two men argued over the squealing baby.

"Does it have to be tonight?" asked Omarr. He held a gem-encrusted dagger in his meaty hand, which was no longer poised above the altar but instead held idly at his side.

"The tome was specific," replied HIRRUSH. He ran his fingers through his lanky hair. "It has to be a new moon. So yes, tonight is the night, unless we want to wait another month."

"Only I thought that perhaps he'd be wailing," said Omarr. "He just looks so ... so happy." He frowned at the baby, which was making distinctly cute noises at them.

"I know what you mean," replied HIRRUSH. "When I was younger, living in the city, there was a baby next door that cried through the night, every night, for a week straight. I couldn't sleep for the screaming. I yelled sometimes, matched his volume as I tried to get my frustrations out, but of course it did nothing to deter him. He kept on wailing with a stamina that was impressive in retrospect. It was on those nights

that I had decided that I would be capable of killing an infant, if it came to it.”

“Yes,” replied Omarr in dismay. “We could maybe try to make him scream at us, to make it easier?”

Hirrush leaned forwards. When he caught the baby’s attention, Hirrush twisted his face into the meanest, most vicious scowl that he knew how to make. The baby giggled and tried to grab at his nose, and Hirrush quickly withdrew, as though it were the hand of some sulfurous demon reaching towards him.

“Poke him with the dagger,” said Hirrush.

“What?” asked Omarr, staring at the dagger in his hand as though he’d completely forgotten that it was there. “Why?”

“Just to get him screaming,” replied Hirrush. “Just to make it easier, so that we can do it for real.”

“You poke him,” said Omarr, holding out the bejeweled dagger to his partner.

Hirrush frowned. He made no move to touch the proffered weapon.

“I don’t know why you grabbed the happiest baby in the orphanage,” he said.

“I wanted to get out of there without making any noise,” explained Omarr. “He was nice and quiet, hardly did more than coo at me. I grew up in an orphanage, remember? The Foresworn Sisters can be vicious when it comes down to it, even for small offenses. I have no idea what they’d have done if

they'd caught me and I wasn't keen to find out. If you wanted a particular sort of baby, you should have said so. The tome only said he had to be healthy."

"Well," said Hurrush, clearing his throat. "Perhaps we can wait until next month then? When we've had time to acclimate to the idea a bit more?"

"Sure," Omarr nodded. "Next month." He looked down at the baby. "What do we do with him?"

"Take him back, of course," said Hurrush. "And next month we'll get a different one, one more ... amenable to the, ah, process."



Ventor loped down the roads as the sun set, trying to get to Leshampur before nightfall.

He moved with long, bounding strides because he was more powerful than an average man, with legs more capable of pushing hard against the ground. He was more powerful because he had taken six different oaths when he was ten years old and steadfastly kept them for twenty years afterward.

Ventor imagined the Oath of Fealty as a thin golden chain. He had been told to go to Leshampur, to find and retrieve the infant child foretold by prophecy, so he imagined the golden chain pulled taut ahead of him, urging him forward. Somewhere not too far ahead, that golden chain led to a baby, and from there threaded all the way back to Marurbo and the throne room. Only when the task was complete would Ventor allow himself to imagine the golden

chain of fealty as laying slack on the ground, connecting himself to the king but demanding nothing.

The prophecy had come crashing down the moment the queen had gone into labor. Ventor had been one of five people to hear it.

*A princess with hair of flame lays beneath the throne,
Vengeful spirits cloak her fragile form.
Blood-soaked clothes and shattered bone,
The dark wizard wrapped in brewing storm.*

*As the princess draws first breath,
The swaddled savior is left behind.
Where the blackened river crosses land of Neth,
The infant forged by those who shape his mind.*

The king had gathered a council of sages within the hour. As his wife was talked through her second birth, he planned for the what the prophecy had foretold. The words were analyzed carefully. Prophecies were rare and rarely good. It was said that the utter destruction that resulted in the Scour had been heralded by a dozen prophecies in the three days preceding it, and the enormous wave that reduced Pereldra to rubble had been foretold in cryptic terms a good decade before it came to pass. The sages said that avoiding a prophecy was possible but difficult. More often than not the actions taken to avoid a prophecy ended up causing it instead. Still, if the unborn princess might be saved by some direct action, it needed to be taken.

Leshampur was one of fifty places identified by the sages. It had a river running through the center of it, and though it was not a river known for being particularly black, it had once been an outpost of the Nethian empire some six hundred years prior. The sages had argued amongst themselves about what the adjective “blackened” might mean. They had predictably arrived at a half dozen different conclusions. It was possible that the “blackened river” was not a literal river at all, but instead a coal mine or something similar, in which case Ventor’s journey would be for nothing.

He knew that it was unlikely that there was a child waiting for him in Leshampur, but he imagined that there was all the same. It was easier to push himself if he thought that he was doing something worthwhile, so he decided to think that this wasn’t all for naught. Sometimes it was just as easy as that. He’d been traveling for four days, and the princess had almost certainly been born already, which meant that the swaddled savior had already been left behind, assuming that the sages were correct in thinking that the obvious reading was the right one. If he had taken the odds at face value, he would have been tempted to stop by the side of the road and take another short rest with his breastplate laid on the ground beside him. Instead he pushed onward, taking no argument from his aching muscles. The forest turned to farmland, and the space between buildings grew smaller and smaller as he went. He arrived in Leshampur just as the last sliver of sun was swallowed by a nearby hill.

“I need to find the orphanage,” said Vantor to a startled villager.

“Where did you come from?” the villager asked. Vantor couldn’t tell what sort of profession the man held and didn’t much care. The golden chain of fealty was taut, but Vantor had no idea where it might be pulling him.

“I come on behalf of King Aldric himself, by his direct order,” said Vantor. “The orphanage, where is it?”

The villager stared dumbly at Vantor, taking in the seven-pointed star etched on his breastplate before coming to the slow realization that he was speaking to an oathkeeper for the king. Finally, he seemed to come to his senses. “It’s on the outskirts,” said the man. “On the other side of the city. I can take you there, if you need a guide.”

Vantor should have said a few words of thanks, but he had taken no oaths of kindness, so he merely sprang away from the villager and continued to take his enormous bounding steps as he crossed the city. He drew stares and shouts from people he passed on the streets, but he moved quickly enough that he didn’t have to deal with the commotion. He spotted the orphanage from three blocks away thanks to the small spire with a seven-pointed star at the top and put on an extra burst of speed that his sore body could barely handle. His oaths gave him more energy than a normal man had, but he’d been pushing himself to his limits for far too long. If there was no child waiting for him at the orphanage, his quest was far from over.

One of the Foresworn Sisters answered the door on the second knock and frowned when she saw Vantor standing before her. She was young and pretty, and she wore a winged wimple above her light blue dress. Vantor imagined his Oath of Chastity as a silver chain, and he imagined it binding him tightly as he looked at her.

“I hadn’t expected someone so soon,” said the Sister.

“So soon?” asked Vantor with a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

“We sent out for a rector just this morning,” said the Sister. “But I can tell from the look on your face that you’re not here because of that request at all.”

Vantor frowned. “I’m afraid that I might be,” he said. “I’m seeking a child that was abandoned here sometime in the last four days, or who was abandoned elsewhere and then brought here.”

“You had better come in,” said the Sister. She gestured inside. “My name is Clarice. I fear that we have much to talk about.”



It had been a dark and stormy night when they had laid everything out for the ritual. Omarr had stolen the baby while the stars were obscured by thick, roiling clouds, with heavy winds to cover the sounds of him moving about. The rain had just started when he’d gotten back to the cottage, though the baby didn’t seem to mind. The flashes of lightning and sounds of thunder had been wonderfully atmospheric when they’d been handling the dagger,

but now that they'd decided not to go through with it — at least not that night — the weather had taken another turn, and it was just a simple downpour that neither of them wanted to go out into.

Their library had just short of two hundred books in it, bought or stolen from all over Donkerk and the lands beyond. Thick illuminated tomes abutted skinny volumes bound with twine. The vast majority of these books related to magics, dark or otherwise, but after half an hour of searching, Omarr retrieved a slender little guide for farmers, which happened to contain within it instructions on how to care for a child if it had lost its mother. These instructions amounted to no more than five scant lines, but that was still more information than the dark wizards had before.

“A goat for a wet nurse?” asked Hirrorush with a raised eyebrow. He glanced at the baby, which was swaddled in cloth and laid down on the table. “How credible is this book?”

“Well, it's just for tonight,” said Omarr. “Once the storm has passed, I'll take him back to the orphanage.”

“And then next month we'll take one less ...” Hirrorush looked at the child. “Less animated.”

“I've been thinking,” said Omarr. “It will be harder to take a baby the second time. They'll notice this one missing, and the Sisters will be more cautious. They'll install locks, or purchase a dog, or simply keep someone on guard.”

Hirrush sighed. "That's something we have a month to figure out. And I agree, it would have been better to have this done tonight, if we were going to do it."

Omarr picked up the baby and rocked him back and forth like he'd seen a woman do once. The baby smiled at him and reached for his face.

"You're going back to the orphanage," Omarr said to the baby. "You got quite lucky tonight." Though as he said it, he realized it sounded too threatening. Then again, they'd been meaning to sacrifice this baby, so perhaps it wasn't fair to try pretending otherwise. He would have apologized to the baby, if Hirrush hadn't been standing there, as little sense as that made. He had no idea how he would feel next month, but he was beginning to get the feeling that it wouldn't matter what baby they managed to get their hands on. It had all sounded so simple in the abstract, though Omarr couldn't say whether he would have been able to convince himself without Hirrush to talk to.

They brought in one of the goats from the small barn. To their faint surprise, the baby cheerfully suckled at its teat. Hirrush burped the baby, something they only knew to do from that same slender book, and afterward they changed his diaper, which required the sacrifice of some cloth to make him a new one. The baby fell asleep in Omarr's lap not long after, having not once cried.

"I worry about returning him," Omarr said in the morning.

“If it’s the Sisters, you need only lie to them,” said Hurrush. “Tell them that he was left on your doorstep. I don’t know what reason someone would have to steal a baby and then bring it back the next day, but the Sisters won’t either. I doubt you could be arrested for it. Questioned, perhaps, but not put under lock and key.”

“Only the next baby we steal, they’ll come asking after me,” said Omarr.

“A problem that can be solved with more lies,” replied Hurrush. “I can take him back, if you prefer.”

“Would you?” asked Omarr. He ran his fingers through his thick beard. “I would appreciate that.”

Half an hour later, Hurrush returned with a frown on his face and the baby cradled in his arms.

“Change of heart?” asked Omarr. He was on top of the roof of their cottage, repairing what the storm had torn up. The cottage was two stories high, with a top layered in sod that helped to compress the logs and keep the house from having drafts in the wintertime. From a distance, it reminded Omarr of an old man with green hair. The cottage listed slightly to one side, the result of three years of neglect after Hurrush’s father had died, before the two of them had come to claim the farmstead. They had talked about tearing it down and building a new place to live on the land, but money always seemed to find its way to other things: rare books, for the most part. The land itself grew wild, save for the area that the goats grazed the grass down to

stubble. The small garden they kept out back was the only bit of farming that they cared to do.

“The storm was heavier than it seemed,” said Hurrush. He let the baby play with his finger, showing none of the fear he’d had the night before. “The bridge was washed out. The water alone wouldn’t have been enough for it, there must have been some bit of debris that struck it. At any rate, the waters are still too high and turbulent for fording or rafting, so it seems that we’re stuck with him for the time being.” Hurrush looked down at the child. “We can keep him for another few days, I suppose. I would drop him on someone’s doorstep, if we had any likely neighbors who might take him and if I thought I could do it without being seen.”

Omarr cleared his throat. “Another few days then, and we’ll bring him back after that.”



“As you said, a child was left here three days ago,” said Clarice. “There was no note left with him.” Her hips swayed as she led him down the hallway. Ventor idly wondered whether she had taken an Oath of Chastity as well. He imagined the same silver chain wrapped around the both of them, but if the chain was his alone, he would have to bind himself all the tighter.

“We took him in of course,” said Clarice. “Though most of the children we get are brought by their family along with some explanation of why they can’t care for the child, or by the guards following some accident that leaves the child without their parents,

it's not entirely uncommon for children to be left on the doorstep. Usually by young mothers who haven't taken the Oath of Marriage."

A strand of blond hair peeked out from beneath Clarice's wimple. When she turned to talk to him, Ventor could feel his eye drawn to it.

"Two days ago, someone crept into the orphanage in the middle of the night and stole the baby," said Clarice. They entered into a small office with a multitude of papers in neat stacks. "Of course we thought that it was the mother, or possibly the father, or some other family member. It's not uncommon for there to a dispute of some sort, though we've never had an outright theft — we would of course prefer for these children to be with their families, so in most cases someone could simply come here and adopt the child in the usual fashion. Sometimes young women give their children to the orphanage and return years later when they feel that they're able to care for a child."

"And in this case?" asked Ventor as he took a seat. "Do you believe that someone left the child on your doorstep and stole him back under cover of night a day later?"

"I don't know," said Clarice. She leaned forward, and the shape of her breasts became visible under her dress. The Oath of Chastity had seemed so easy when he had taken it at the age of ten. "We don't take this kidnapping lightly of course, no matter who perpetrated it. That was why we sent for a rector, in the hopes that we might be provided someone who

could track down the kidnapper. But I take it that you're not here for that reason."

"There is a prophecy," said Ventor. "It was ambiguous enough that I can't say for certain, but I think it very likely that the child named in it was the one left at your doorstep. As to the culprits ... the prophecy did not say. I have some skill in tracking though, and it's possible that I might be able to track the kidnapper down. I gave my oath that I would try to find this child, or those who mean to raise him. Is there anything more that you can tell me?"

Clarice sat back in her chair, and folded her hands on top of the desk. "One of the Sisters raised a theory when it happened," she said slowly. "There are those who would steal a child to raise as their own, in an attempt to bypass the process of adoption. We make supervisory visits to those who have claimed one of the children from us, which rankle some. But there are also those who might want a child for more nefarious purposes, particularly a young one. Dark wizards, or black witches."

Ventor clenched his fists. "A problem in these parts?"

"Not as such," said Clarice. "Which is why I don't credit it much. There are a handful of hedge witches within a day's walk of here, but none that I know of that have done anything truly black. Animal sacrifice seems to be the worst of it. It's not impossible that one of them has gone over the edge, I'll grant that. And no dark wizards, to my knowledge."

“We don’t suffer such in the capital,” said Vantor evenly.

“I am aware,” said Clarice with a smile. “I don’t approve of it any more than you do, but when the dark practitioners aren’t directly hurting anyone it’s difficult to move the guard to do anything about it. That goes double when there isn’t anything that the guard *can* do about it. Take the matter back to the capital, if you wish.”

“I will,” said Vantor with a sigh. The wind seemed to go out from his sails. Four days was too long to travel. “I’ve pushed myself hard to get here so quickly, and it seems that this quest has turned into something completely different. Do you have a bed I could use for the night?”

Clarice’s mouth twisted into a mischievous smile. “I do,” she replied. She leaned forward. “Some beds are warmer than others.”

“I’ve taken an Oath of Chastity,” said Vantor, though he regretted it immediately after the words had left his lips. Clarice seemed completely unfazed by this.

“I as well,” she said. “But together we might examine the wordings of our Oaths and see what we might permit ourselves.”

Vantor cleared his throat, but before he could formulate a response to that, the Sister stood from her chair and moved past him, with her dress trailing behind her.



Adrianna came to their cottage five days after the new moon.

She had been a milkmaid before she became a witch. She came to the attention of Omarr and Hurrush the year before, when they heard a rumor of a hedge witch practicing close to them. It had taken a week for them to track her down, and once they did, they gave her a quick and dirty lesson in the social aspects of practicing dark magic. She had inherited the profession from her great-grandmother, a fearsome old woman who had left one too many books behind, which Adrianna had proceeded to poke her nose into. The magic she did — as her grandmother before her — was mostly healing magic, the kinds which Omarr had often argued had no business being illegal. A sacrifice of the smallest toe on the left foot could remove a man's limp and cure him of chronic pain for a time, but it was a crime all the same, albeit a crime that nearly everyone would look the other way on.

"Hurrush isn't feeling well," said Omarr as he let her into the cottage. It was the simplest lie they'd been able to think of. A quart of pig's blood dribbled in a circle would keep any sounds from the second floor from reaching Adrianna's ears.

"Anything I can help with?" asked Adrianna.

"No," said Omarr quickly. "Though ... do you know of a ritual to cure the common cold? And if so, what the price to be paid is?"

Adrianna frowned. "I would have to check gran's books, but I believe that a sacrifice of a healthy tooth can cure someone of it."

"A steep price," said Omarr.

"They often are," Adrianna replied. "Sometimes unreasonably so. People come to me with their problems, and all too often they turn away when I tell them what it will take to make the problem go away — if the problem can be made to go away at all. Just last week I had a man come to me with his son, who was wasting away. The poor boy was going to die, that was obvious all around. I told the man that it would cost his life to save his son. He decried me for a witch — which I obviously am — and he told me to keep my foul magics to myself."

"Did you know he wouldn't pay the price?" asked Omarr.

"I suspected," Adrianna replied. "He had four other children — healthy ones. He wouldn't be able to support them if he were dead. But even if the sickly son had been his only, I doubt he was the sort of man to give his life."

Omarr checked that the kettle still had water in it. He put it on top of the pot-bellied stove before sticking another piece of wood in with the embers. When that was done, he tapped at his lips with his finger.

"Better to tell him that it was impossible," said Omarr.

"Oh?" asked Adrianna.

Omarr nodded. "Better not to anger people for no reason. And as to the price ... if he had been willing to sacrifice himself for his son, to let you spill his life's blood on the ground, would you have actually gone through with it?" They had agreed not to tell Adrianna about the ritual they'd been ready to perform on top of the block of onyx, but perhaps he could get a sense of what her reaction would be.

"Maybe," said Adrianna cautiously. "Would you?"

"We're not in the business of helping people," said Omarr. "But yes, I likely would. A life for a life isn't an easy decision by any means, but there are times that it's justified. If you can exchange forty good years for sixty, well, that can be seductive."

"Seductive," repeated Adrianna skeptically.

"But the point I was trying to make," Omarr said, "Is that if you weren't going to do it anyway, it's better not to offer. If you're a witch, one that people know, you need to make friends. That man might forget about you, but he might also harbor a grudge. When his son is being buried, he might be thinking of you and the offer you made him. And it might be that he gets angry with you. Might be he decides to rid the world of you."

"I have my magic," said Adrianna. "But I take your point. 'Don't upset the locals' is the first rule you taught me. That was actually what I wanted to talk to you about."

Omarr took the kettle from the stove and poured the hot water into a mug with curled fingers of dried wortroot he pulled from a twisted braid beside the

kitchen window. The smell sucked at his nostrils and made his hair stiffen. “Did you upset the locals?” he asked.

“No,” said Adrianna. “But someone else did. Someone stole a baby from the orphanage in Leshampur.”

Omarr kept himself from freezing in place. “When? The bridge was washed out, last I heard. I’m surprised any news has come through.”

“There’s an oathkeeper come up from the capital,” said Adrianna. “He leapt across the river.”

Omarr swore, and nearly dropped the tea.

“I talked to him —”

Omarr swore again.

“Look, it’s fine,” said Adrianna. “He came by my gran’s place because he had heard some of the legends about her, and I told him that she’d died some time ago. He thought it was suspicious that I was alone, but I invited him in and we talked for a bit. He cautioned me away from dark magics, if you can believe that. He can’t prove anything, even if he suspects. He was after this missing child like a dog after a bone. I’m hoping that keeps him from going after me. I just thought you should know. There are plenty of people who know me, enough that could point him in my direction. I’ll lay low. So far as I’m aware, I’m the only one that knows about you, so you should be safe, but just in case — be on the lookout.”

“We will be,” said Omarr.

“Omarr, he passed through the wards like they weren’t even there,” said Adrianna with a frown. “It’s supposed to be hard to get to my place.”

“That would give away the game,” said Omarr. “Your gran put up those wards, and she was a clever one. Hirrorush and I will stop by in a few weeks when this has blown over and inspect them a second time, but I have little doubt that there’s some bit of mental magic in there that allows passage for those who are only asking questions. If he’d found his way barred by black magic, he would have been on you in an instant, so the wards let him pass, and pretended at not being there.”

“It gave me a start,” said Adrianna. “But I suppose that your explanation makes sense.” She stood up from her chair. “I did have one other question, before I go.”

Omarr nodded, and took a long sip of his tea.

“Did you and Hirrorush take the baby?” she asked.

Omarr frowned. “Yes.”

Adrianna turned away from him.

“He’s upstairs,” said Omarr.

“But you took him for some dark ritual?” Adrianna asked, still facing away from him.

“Yes,” said Omarr. He cleared his throat. “We didn’t go through with it.”

Adrianna let out a breath she’d been holding in and turned back around. Omarr had thought perhaps she would be crying, but her eyes were dry. “Well, let me

see him then. We'll have to wait for this whole thing to blow over, and then ... then I don't know."

"You don't need to have any part of this," said Omarr.

"Nonsense," said Adrianna. She put her hands on the side of hips. "You're my mentors, and you've given me some strong protection already, and if you've done some fool thing, then I can protect you in return. It's what gran would have done. Though she didn't hold truck with human sacrifice."

Omarr had seen enough of the wards around Adrianna's place to know that this wasn't strictly true, but he and Hirrorush hadn't shared that fact with Adrianna just yet. He got up from his chair and gestured for her to follow him up the narrow staircase to the second floor. The silence ward popped like a bubble as he passed through it, though the baby wasn't making any noise. Hirrorush raised an eyebrow at Omarr's appearance, then frowned when he saw Adrianna behind him.

"We weren't going to tell her," said Hirrorush. The baby lay cradled in his lap.

"An oathkeeper from the capital has shown up in Leshampur," said Omarr. "He paid her a visit. Naturally her thoughts turned to us."

Hirrorush swore loudly, then gave a guilty look at the baby.

"What have you been feeding him?" Adrianna asked. She held out her hands, and Hirrorush reluctantly handed the baby to her.

“He’s been suckling at one of the goats,” said Omarr.

“Hrm,” Adrianna replied. “I would say that he should have a proper wet nurse, but a goat or donkey is as good as he’d have gotten at the orphanage.” She spent a few moments checking over the baby and seemed to find everything satisfactory. “And what are you planning to do with him?”

Omarr and Hirrorush looked to each other. The idea had briefly been floated that perhaps they could sacrifice him when the new moon came again, but that had been three days ago, and neither had mentioned it since then. The presence of an oathkeeper changed things substantially, mostly in that it cut their options down.

“We might keep him,” ventured Omarr.

“Keep him?” asked Adrianna. She looked between the two of them. “To what purpose?”

“To raise him,” replied Omarr. “If he went back to the orphanage he would more likely than not spend ten years eating gruel and getting whatever feeble education the Sisters provide him with. When he’s ten years old, he’ll be taken to the monastery and told to swear some oaths. If he keeps them, he’ll be an oathkeeper, bound to a pitiable existence in return for awe inspiring powers. If he doesn’t keep the oaths, he’ll be sent out into the world on his own with nothing but the clothes on his back and whatever he can steal.” Omarr had run away the day before initiation, but he’d seen the path that was being laid out in front of him.

“We haven’t decided yet,” said Hurrush. “But if there’s an oathkeeper on the lookout, it might be best to lay low either way.”

The baby cooed in Adrianna’s arms.



Two months passed before Vantor was called back.

It had taken him four days to get to Leshampur, but that was with an oathkeeper’s speed, and he’d pushed himself hard even then. He had sent a letter back to the capital in the morning, and the response had taken three full weeks to get back to him, carried by merchants and travelers. When the oathkeepers weren’t otherwise engaged, they were sometimes used as runners between the larger cities of Donkerk, but with the prophecy in the air those services had been halted.

He frowned at the letter as Clarice slipped an arm around his stomach from behind.

“Anything interesting?” she asked with a purr in his ear.

“I’m going home,” he said.

“Oh,” replied Clarice. She disentangled herself from him and sat back on the bed.

Vantor had not violated his Oath of Chastity, but it felt wrong all the same. They were skirting the spirit of the oath, even if they’d been careful not to cross the letter of it. He had gathered that he was not the first man she had done such things with, though he hadn’t dared to ask, for he suspected that he

wouldn't take her answer well. The other Sisters hadn't commented on the arrangement that she'd made with him, though he had received a scowl from one of the older ones. One of the perks of being an oathkeeper was the fact that if anyone questioned whether you had broken your oath, you could simply make a twisting jump and land with perfect poise on the top of a two story building to answer them. The seven-pointed star on his chest signaled strongly to the people he met on the street, but not so strongly as the plainly visible power of his five oaths.

"I'll miss you," said Clarice with a soft voice.

"Miss me?" asked Vantor. He turned to look at her — to take her in. She had been forward on his first night in Leshampur, and she had never stopped being so. She was beautiful and confident, and even with their nights aside she had been a valuable aide to him as he ranged out around the city. Missing her wouldn't be the half of it.

"We both knew that it wouldn't last forever," said Clarice. "Come now, no need to be sad about it."

"No," said Vantor. "If there were some way ..." He trailed off.

"But there's not," said Clarice.

He'd wanted her to ask him to break his vows. He wanted her to feel as strongly about him as he did about her. His chest felt tight. His normally still heart was beating too fast. He imagined the silver chain of Chastity binding him tightly and the golden chain of Fealty pulling him back towards the capital. The letter from the king didn't carry the full weight

of a direct command, but it was plain enough that he needed to come back as soon as prudent. The two months in Leshampur had yielded little, with the most promising lead being the orphan that had been stolen the night after the princess was born. The trail had mostly evaporated.

“I visited a young woman shortly after I got here,” said Vantor. “Witchcraft runs in her blood. I visited her again two days ago, and there was something off about her, a falseness in her answers. She was sweating. A witch, I have little doubt of that, but it might be that she had some involvement with the kidnapping. I could write back to the king and ask for more time to pursue this.”

“Because of me,” said Clarice. “Not because you’re acting in the interests of the king that you’ve sworn your oath to.” Her voice was firm. She sat away from him, no longer touching.

“It’s not that simple,” said Vantor. “There’s a legitimate reason for me to stay.”

“No,” said Clarice. “This is how oaths get broken. You travel down a path, pretending it’s a good one, and one day you look back at the path you’ve walked, and you realize that it was bad all along. And just like that, the spell gets broken, and you’re left as nothing more than a mortal man.”

He wanted to ask if she loved him, but he didn’t want to hear her say no. He wanted to get angry with her, but he didn’t do that either. Instead, he simply walked away, without so much as a kiss to say goodbye.

It didn't occur to him that perhaps he had been right in wanting to stay, even if his reasoning was clouded. And so it was that the orphan was raised by two dark wizards.

The Kidnapping

“We need money,” said Omarr. After they’d put Henry to bed, they’d cracked a small cask of ale and drank from the large mugs. A fire crackled in the fireplace. Adrianna had come to like the two men, somewhat despite herself. They had taught her much. While their theft of Henry had soured her opinion, their subsequent adoption of him had warmed her back up. That had been five years ago. Now she acted as something of an aunt to the boy, stopping in from time to time to dote on him. For their part, Omarr and Hirrorsh seemed to be loving if unconventional parents.

“What *do* you do for money?” asked Adrianna. She grew most of her own food and took in coin from the people who came calling for her services. Disappointingly, much of it involved sex in one way or another, and Adrianna suspected that it was because the people were committing one taboo and didn’t care whether they compounded that taboo with the taboo about dark magic. Her gran had a thick book devoted to virility, pregnancy, and contraception, which she was forced to consult often.

“You know that we’re not conventionally moral people?” asked Omarr.

Adrianna looked up towards the ceiling, at where Henry lay sleeping in his room. He was a cute child,

with rosy cheeks and curly blond hair. "I am aware," she replied.

"We were kidnappers," said Hurrush. Omarr shot him a look, but Hurrush continued. "It's the simple truth, no sense in coating it with sugar. We never harmed the children, and each one of them was returned safe and sound —"

"Wait a minute," said Adrianna. She pushed her ale away. "The duke's son? That was you?"

"Just so," said Omarr.

"As I was saying, we returned each of them safe and sound, and we made enormous piles of money doing it," said Hurrush. "Not even as much as we could have. We always made sure to only ask for as much as we knew they could give to us without sparing it real thought."

"You were kidnappers," said Adrianna. "And you need money. So you're going to kidnap again?" She felt slightly queasy, though partly that was because she was on her second mug of ale.

"We need to raise Henry right," said Omarr. "We have no skills, and we can't ply our one true trade. You've seen that the garden has expanded in recent years — look, it's not that we want to do this, but when you weigh the harm caused against the good done, you have to see that on balance we're in the right."

"Or at least neutral," said Hurrush.

"Harm against others," Adrianna replied. "Good for yourselves."

“Good for Henry,” said Omarr. Hirrorush nodded. “We live a small life. A quiet life. We don’t need much, but we don’t have much either. The cottage has a lean to it that’s going to need fixing in the near future if we don’t want to risk a collapse. Henry grows out of his clothes almost as fast as we have them sewn. If we want him to be something more than just a farmer’s son ... we’re going to need resources. We’ve never lived a life of luxury. It’s not about that. It’s about providing him with the sort of boundless world a child should have.”

Adrianna sighed. “You’ve already made up your minds,” she said. She looked around the cottage. It was simple and sturdy, with the exception of the lean. Nothing in it spoke of men who squandered their money, save perhaps for the rows upon rows of books that filled one of the rooms. She had always thought of Omarr and Hirrorush as scholars of dark magic rather than practitioners, and they’d done little to prove her wrong. “What about the child you’re going to kidnap?”

“What about her?” asked Omarr.

“You have understandable gripes with the nobility,” said Adrianna. “I can understand how you think the loss of money would be justified. If you’ve thought about the horror of having a children stolen, perhaps you can justify it by thinking that these nobles deserve it. And possibly you’re even right. But what about the feelings of the child, who — and I mean no offense — who will have to live with being taken by the two of you?”